

. The Birth of John is the polar opposite of the birth of Jesus; six months apart to the day, they are the twin points of reference of the year. In midsummer, we pray to be gathered into the provident plan of the God who saves us.

Homily

One of the differences between our faith and others lies in the special value we give to the individual. In our time we have seen distortion creeping into this part of our heritage. But it is still a vital part of the Christian faith.

If you are a Buddhist, you will believe that there is nothing of enduring significance in a particular human being. Wisdom for a Buddhist lies in recognising that a human being is a temporary assemblage of different elements, due one day to dissolve and pass away; it is therefore of little significance to search for meaning in the individual character of any human being.

For Christians it is quite different. Conceived by the Creator in his own image and likeness, we believe that we are unique and destined for a share in the eternal glory of God, who does not throw away what he decides to create. For this reason we seek for a glimpse of the divine life in each of the children of God, which enables us to love them: and we have a permanent high value for even the least of them: they are precious to God, and precious to us.

The birth of John the Baptist shows us something that is true for all of us. We arrive in the world by God's provident purpose, by a sovereign act of his will. We can't think that he does this without any ulterior aim. He has work for us to do, he has a special rôle for each of us to fulfil. No-one can define us, or decide we should not be here, or discount our destiny. The very least of us may carry a vital component for the Creator's plan.

At the same time, there is a consequence in this God-given meaning which we believe our lives have: it is this. We may ourselves have to abandon and modify over and over again our own understanding of what we're about and how we will be fulfilled. This constant leaving open the door for God's meaning to be born is essential. Otherwise we run the risk of hijacking our life and forcing it into some shape that seems good to us.

That is what modern and post-modern people seem to have done. In a break for apparent freedom they have relegated the notion of God as the fountain of all meaning, and placed their own very small ambitions in the driving-seat. This is enslavement in the end, because we do not have the power to give ourselves the eternal meaning that is God's gift. We may find our little plans for ourselves very absorbing for a long time. But the approach of the end of our story will take away our hoard of meaning; and then the judgement day will arrive, where what we have done will be measured against the plan of God.

A man who lives for himself and for the fulfilment of his own plan will never die as a martyr, and we have to acknowledge that the Baptist and even Jesus found the prospect of God's plan impossible to embrace gladly. The imprisoned John the Baptist sent messengers to Jesus asking him to bring on the liberation he looked for; Jesus knelt in agony, begging for the cup to be taken from him. In the end, they both surrendered their lives to the plan of God; and in that moment they were liberated, to take their place in the Kingdom of light.